BOOK REVIEWS

Chima J. Korieh. *The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria. Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2010. xx-370 pp. Bibliography, Index (paperback) ISBN 978-1-55238-268-4*

Chima Korieh's *The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria* analyses the transformation of agriculture in Southeastern Nigeria during the colonial and post - colonial periods and the role of the rural population in the process. It emphasizes the role of the local people in shaping the colonial process. Quite interestingly, it brings to the fore, direct accounts of the experiences of peasant farmers during colonialism. With primary focus on central Igboland (present Abia and Imo states), Korieh's work undoubtedly fills an important gap in the existing studies dealing with economic transformations in colonial Nigeria. Although his scope is mainly the colonial and early post - colonial periods, he briefly takes his readers back in time to explain the economic, social and political structures of pre-colonial Igboland. The author affirms that 'a high level of intensive internal exchange had developed in the region before the overseas trade in slaves', thus debunking, in some sense, the Eurocentric notion of *Tropical Abundance* which holds that the people were generally lazy and needed an external force to put their idle hands to work. It carefully surveys a wide range of issues such as the impact of agriculture on gender relations and changes in gender roles, effects of such phenomena as the slave trade, 'legitimate commerce', colonialism, the two World Wars and independence, on the local population upon whose shoulders the burdens of these transformations rested.

The study further reveals how agricultural practices shaped gender relations in Igboland and how gender roles were in turn, shaped by state intervention in local economic arrangements during the colonial period and after. The work can be said to be people - oriented, as the author relies heavily on oral

evidence to explore the experiences of the people under colonialism and their contributions in shaping the economy during the period. Korieh tries to give a balanced view by assessing the 'internalists' and 'externalists' arguments as regards Africa's deplorable economic situation. Following, he points out that 'the broader issues facing African agriculture go beyond the development ideology pursued by the African elite'. He links part of the problem to state intervention in peasant agriculture which has its roots in colonial times. But this argument is not entirely different from the externalist point of view which blames such factors as political instability, lack of industrialization, poor investment in agriculture among others, for the economic difficulties faced by African nations.

The work is also strongly opposed to European gender biases against women as exhibited by the colonial regime in Igboland, as elsewhere in the country. Korieh reveals that 'British rule transformed the context of traditional society by creating institutions and class differences based on European notions of gender roles', so that even though they were active partners in the making of the colonial economy through their roles as farmers, traders, producers and more, the government deliberately excluded women from benefitting from any programme aimed at improving agriculture and rural life. The invaluable roles of women in shaping the colonial economy were submerged by the colonists through the 'official' designation of men as farmers and women as 'farmers' wives'. This phenomenon shows that the colonial administration failed to take account of the peculiar gender structure of Igboland. Rather, it superimposed European patriarchal gender ideology on the people, thereby creating tensions which would turn the people against it. As the author rightly notes, 'Igbo societies had a well-developed sense of gender distinction but the idea of a very strict division of labour along gender lines did not exist. Gender roles were marked by a high level of fluidity in the roles women and men performed'.

Again, different thoughts exist in African historiography as to the level of the effect of colonialism on the continent. Scholars like J.F. Ade Ajayi, Dennis Lawmann and others share the view that the colonial era was just a

brief, insignificant episode in African history; that colonialism lasted for less than a century in most parts of Africa and thus, should not be accorded much emphasis. Another school of thought opposes this argument, stating that colonialism, though brief in some parts of Africa, had very grave effects on the people and their institutions, as it so dramatically
and irreversibly changed Africa's economic and socio-political systems, amongst other things. Marxist scholars such as Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon and others, share this view. There is also a third school which holds that colonialism was more of a continuum in African history. This group argues that although colonial rule was the outright imposition of foreign political rule and economic domination, it did not completely prevent the continued development of the continent especially in terms of its institutions. This school also holds that Africans were not hapless victims of colonial rule; that they were in many instances, active shapers of the colonial process. *The Land Has Changed* reveals Prof. Korieh as belonging to the last group. According to him, 'the book emphasizes that economic and social changes were not the result of official policies and actions alone, even though the choices made by local farmers and traders and the rewards they received were determined by conditions created by the state'. He emphasizes that rural people were important agents of change and the instruments through which the state often implemented its agenda and as such, should be the medium through which official policies and actions would be assessed.

This position of the author helps not only to tell the story of colonialism as it happened, but also brings to the fore, the role of Africans in shaping the colonial process as a means of survival and of course, as a proof of their resilience and undaunted resistance to foreign domination. However, it also raises such questions as; how much economic and political power did the people control and how often did their demands, rebellions and petitions fetch them the concessions they demanded?

Further, the author's view that 'most of Igboland operated a subsistence economy until the mid-seventeenth century' was not buttressed enough as to satisfy the claim. It leaves the reader with such questions as; what areas

fell within this description, what areas did not, and why? Also, some economic historians including Onwuka N. Njoku are opposed to the use of the term 'subsistence' to describe pre-colonial Igbo economy or the economy of any group in Nigeria. For Njoku, 'the notion that the economy was basically subsistence may be regarded as partial truth, at best. Regional specializations existed and stimulated long distance trade which webbed an extensive area into an economic regime. A sophisticated taxation, credit and currency system which satisfied the basic purposes of money...was operative. Savings and lending schemes existed among the Igbo and Yoruba, respectively, in the form of *isusu* and *esusu*'.

Overall, the work is the history of an African society's experiences, contributions, collaborations and resistance to colonialism and its consequences. Two themes span the book. One is the role of state policies in shaping the economic life of the people. The other is the people's responses to these policies and their role as agents of historical change. This, of course, is a regional approach and as the author quite rightly points out, 'the advantage ... include the opportunity to collect data in depth, to provide comparative perspectives on how different parts of Igboland responded to varying ecological niches and to explain the varying responses to the transformation that came with colonialism'. *The Land Has Changed* is indeed a departure from the classic debates about the long - term effects of imperialism on colonized societies. Although his tone is not as severe as that of Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Korieh states his displeasure of colonial rule by putting '...the reader in direct contact with ordinary victims of colonial control, evoking a feeling of what it was like to live through the era'. He thus, reveals the evils of colonialism, while not overlooking its merits. It is, in this sense, a contrast of Rodney's work and to a reasonable extent, a semblance of Anthony Hopkins' *Economic History of West Africa*.

The book is indeed, a well-researched account of rural survival in the face of social, political and economic changes in the 19th and 20th centuries. Without a doubt, the work can be described as a classical, indispensable source material for students, teachers, researchers and observers of Igbo

history. Its careful detail and analysis of events as well as the exposition of a new and quite important source of historical enquiry such as petitions of rural traders and farmers in colonial Nigeria opens a new and interesting vista in historical scholarship, with especial regard to Igboland.

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